

# Introduction: New Connections to Civic Activism and City Life

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We are pleased to present the second volume of *Perspectives on Civic Activism and City Life*, a series of occasional papers on urban anthropology from the Center for Cultural Understanding and Change (CCUC) at The Field Museum. As with the first volume, this issue contains articles from student interns who participated in the Urban Research Initiative (URI), begun in 1998 by CCUC, with major sponsorship from The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation and the John Nuveen Company.

The URI is a participatory research project that engages a wide variety of organizations as partners with researchers to explore questions that are both salient to the specific organization and able to be investigated through qualitative research methods that are the hallmark of anthropology. Student interns conduct the research after working closely with their respective community partners and the Center's staff to develop the research questions. Once the research is completed, students write reports for the organization and also delineate a public education project (e.g., an exhibit, a community forum, a video) that could effectively communicate the research results to wider audiences.

The first volume of *Perspectives* contained only selected articles by the students who participated in the first two summers of the URI. In response to comments and suggestions by community partners, we have included in this second volume articles written by our partners reflecting on the value of the participatory research process.

Through dialogues with community partners over the course of the past few years, three salient themes emerged from engaging in the participatory research process. The community partners and the researchers agreed that these themes could help focus the growing network on a common research agenda. The first theme, *the meaning of community*, suggests that communities in Chicago no longer are



confined necessarily to neighborhood boundaries. Rather, citizens and organizations are interested in exploring the ways in which people's actions and changing social relationships lead to the creation of new forms of community. The second theme, *the meaning of place in Chicago*, concedes that while communities may be stretching beyond neighborhoods, people remain highly invested in specific places and are engaged in a variety of efforts to protect and improve localities and landscapes they cherish. Understanding these efforts sheds light on how residents shape the character of the city. The final theme, *the mean-*

*ing of being American*, wrestles with issues surrounding the construction of American identity. The latest census data indicate the rapidly changing demography of Chicago as new immigrants continue to settle here, and as old patterns of housing discrimination and segregation finally are starting to give way under on-going civil rights efforts. Immigrants today (whether from abroad, from other regions of the country, or even from other places in the metropolitan region), however, are arriving into a vastly changed social context than that of previous times of high immigration such as the early twentieth century and the mid-1960s. New immigrants are much more linked to global economic flows, travel back and forth more often from their homelands, and have a different conception of what it means to settle here. Yet, as previous immigrants did before them, they continue to shape the nature of American identity. Community organizations working with immigrants need to gain understanding of how these processes are working. The articles in this issue explore some of our preliminary findings on these three related themes and they continue to explore the many facets of civic activism as it is unfolding in neighborhoods throughout Chicago. These articles also allow us to gain insights from the perspectives of community leaders as they reflect on how they meet the challenges of neighborhood organization.

The first article focuses most strongly on the theme of the meaning of place in Chicago and relates how the experiences of participating in actions for more affordable housing are carried over into efforts on the part of homeless women to help themselves. It discusses how important having a home is, and how the need for affordable housing galvanized people, in particular, homeless women, to act on their own behalf, first to demand a place in a city-subsidized residential development and subsequently to establish their own apartment building. This article, by Rebecca Burwell, chronicles the way in which the Women's Empowerment Project (a part of the Chicago Coalition for the Homeless) was successfully able to organize women in homeless shelters to seek and obtain funding for and to design a new residential facility by helping women find their own voice and build support among each other.

The second and third articles form a set which reflects all three of the research themes, while the theme of the meaning of community is the most salient. These articles discuss the changing character of the Albany Park region of Chicago and how residents, through their organizations, are attempting to create a high quality of life by building on

the diverse social assets located there. Joel Bookman, former Executive Director of the North River Commission, reflects on how the Commission adjusted to the changing demographics of Albany Park, and how the research that student interns undertook assisted the organization to take a more inclusive approach to community development. Gretchen Fox and Hubert Izienicki, the students who worked with the North River Commission, describe their research findings, and how these led them to make a recommendation for taking advantage of the rich cultural diversity of the area.

In the first volume of *Perspectives*, an article by student researcher Victoria Hegner described the diverse responses of elderly Jewish immigrants from Russia to life in a new place. They are themselves struggling with the issues of identity and belonging raised by their journey here. Now, in this volume, Rabbi Philip Lefkowitz, whose synagogue was the community partner for this research project, discusses the insights the research offered him, and how he has been able to further serve these new members of his community as a result. Finally, in the last article, we hear from Jean Carter-Hill, a co-founder of Imagine Englewood...if!, a spin-off of Imagine Chicago which also is a URI community partner. Along with co-author Kathryn Haines, she describes the work of her organization and how they are creating hope and community in a neighborhood mostly characterized in the popular media as "downtrodden," "crime-ridden," and "isolated."

We hope that readers will appreciate the diverse perspectives presented here and begin to see that the city is a vital place of lively debate, strong community-based development efforts, and creative people searching for innovative ways to address the concerns of everyday life. We hope that future issues of this occasional paper series can continue to include reports from community-based organizations about their work, as well as contributions from scholars and activists on the nature of city life. Our plan is to continue this working paper series in an on-line format. Look for us in the future at <http://www.fieldmuseum.org/ccuc/perspectives.htm>. We look forward to receiving your comments and contributions.

*Photograph © The Field Museum*

# Creating Brand New Beginnings: One Story of Women's Organizing

Rebecca Burwell

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The Women's Empowerment Project (WEP) was created by the Chicago Coalition for the Homeless (CCH). Its goal is to empower women who are homeless to advocate for their right to decent and affordable housing, child care, and livable wage jobs.

Critical to these efforts was the acquisition and development of an abandoned building on Chicago's South Side: the Brand New Beginnings Project (BNB)<sup>1</sup>, a 24-unit, subsidized rental building for low-income women and children. The Brand New Beginnings Project was developed by women involved in WEP and by organizers at CCH.

In the course of my fieldwork in 1999, I conducted face-to-face interviews with 28 people, did two phone interviews, and compiled my own observations from coalition meetings, dinners, shelters, and appointments with the Brand New Beginnings lawyer and developer. All names and identifying characteristics (except those at the CCH) have been changed to ensure the confidentiality of participants.

## A History Lesson or Two

During the 1980s, Chicago Mayor Harold Washington recognized homelessness as a city crisis. He established a task force on homelessness as well as the Low-Income Trust Fund to help subsidize the cost of housing in the city.

When Washington died in 1987 and Richard M. Daley became mayor, the task force was dismantled, and the Department of Human Services took on the issue of homelessness. According to members of the Chicago Coalition for the Homeless, the Daley administration sees homelessness as a social problem, not an economic one. Coalition members see the introduction of tax increment financing (TIF) properties and the tearing down of public housing as



indications that the city is not willing to deal directly with a housing crisis that has economic roots. For example, between 1990 and 1999, the Chicago region lost 50,000 units of affordable rental units. In addition, 200,000 households earn less than 30 percent of the area median income (about \$21,000 for a family of four). In Chicago, a worker must earn at least \$17.31 an hour in order to pay rent on a fair-market apartment ([www.chicagohomeless.org](http://www.chicagohomeless.org), 2002). Clearly, it is not drugs or violence that affect homelessness, but the lack of affordable housing and living wage jobs that contribute to the growing housing crisis.

In recent decades, as Chicago residents left the city for the suburbs, Chicago has been losing its tax base. During his administration, Daley has promoted the re-development and growth of certain downtown neighborhoods, particularly the west and south Loop. These areas have historically been low-income rental areas, surrounded by dying or abandoned industrial properties and single-room occupancy units.

<sup>1</sup>Brand New Beginnings opened in 2001, and is home to 24 families of women with children. BNB continues to grow in support services, which include a tenant counselor and support groups.

The Daley administration has offered incentives to redevelop these areas by offering tax breaks (TIFs) to developers. The city has declared some neighborhoods as "blighted." When this labeling occurs, revenues from the tax base in those areas are frozen, and the money supports redevelopment, not parks or schools in the neighborhoods. Developers then bid to redevelop the area, and consequently raise property values and push out low-income residents (Dixon, 1998; Dye and Merriman, 2000).

This gentrification of inner-city neighborhoods, although it has regenerated some areas, has also displaced many folks. As a result, the loss of public and low-income housing has been great, and homelessness has increased. For example, the Chicago Housing Authority has demolished over 18,000 low-income rental units in the past five years; some will be replaced, but a net of 13,000 will be lost ([www.chicagohomeless.org](http://www.chicagohomeless.org)). In addition, many rental units have been lost to re-development - the transformation of rental units to condominiums or single family homes. Also, there was a 35 percent increase in the number of families seeking admission into Chicago area shelters in 2001. Consequently, finding shelter and affordable housing is an increasing problem in Chicago.

## Focusing on Women

Enter two groups: the Chicago Coalition for the Homeless, a 20-year-old grass-roots advocacy group created to organize homeless people and fight alongside them to secure decent and affordable housing; and the Women's Empowerment Project, developed out of the coalition organizing wing in 1992 to address the needs of homeless women.

Organizers with the Women's Empowerment Project, developed by Della Mitchell, CCH staff member since 1989, visit different women's shelters once a month. During these meetings, the organizers at CCH listen to the concerns and issues facing homeless women and help them develop strategies for creating change.

At its inception, CCH had no specific focus on the needs of homeless women. Yet those needs were considerable. For instance, many homeless women are also mothers; this means they can't just "up and run out," as one informant said, to a rally or demonstration. The WEP was created to ascertain and address the unique needs of homeless women and their children and to organize homeless women in ways that take gender and motherhood into account.

Indeed, a gendered analysis of homelessness is often absent from the discussion of affordable housing, which for women is complicated by domestic violence, lack of affordable child care, and the lack of jobs with a livable wage.

When Mitchell and fellow CCH organizer Virginia Warren first visited the shelters, they began by simply listening to the women's concerns. One former WEP participant explained that whenever someone made a comment, they were encouraged and respected, even if fellow participants didn't agree with the person's opinions or decisions. For example, one woman at a South Side shelter, who had been in an abusive relationship, decided to return to her batterer. Although other WEP members did not believe this was a good decision, they nonetheless respected her right to make that choice.

Another unique aspect of the project was that the women eventually began to run the meetings themselves. This gave them the sense that the WEP gatherings were their meetings; their issues were what counted.

Out of these meetings, CCH organizers decided to train women who wanted to become community leaders. This led to the seven-week, Saturday training workshops in 1991. A number of issues emerged during the Saturday sessions. The group talked about power relationships and looked at the nuts and bolts of social action and teamwork. The workshops also gave women tools to organize people, lobby politicians, research issues, build a supportive, grass-roots base of power, develop leadership skills, and do public speaking.

## Fighting Back

During the course of these workshops, the women began to recognize they were being blocked by the city's tax-breaks to wealthy and powerful developers and business owners who wanted to redevelop "deteriorating" inner-city neighborhoods. At one of the Saturday meetings, the women arrived with a clipping from the newspaper; it was an article about Presidential Towers, four high-rise apartment buildings in the west Loop whose developer had to be repeatedly bailed out of debt by the United States Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) because of several mortgage foreclosures.

As the women read the article, it dawned on them that their right to affordable housing was being eclipsed by the city's insistence on helping wealthy land developers. In their view, the bailout of Presidential Towers used city and fed-

eral housing funds, money that could have just as easily been spent on low-income housing for homeless women and children. Since Presidential Towers was subsidized by HUD, they and others felt it should have set aside 20 percent of its apartments for low-income families; however, it had been



exempted from this regulation by an amendment introduced by Representative Dan Rostenkowski.

Soon the women became "fired up," as one participant said, and decided to take action. They began by trying to rent apartments at Presidential Towers.

Della Mitchell, a 50-year-old African-American, was the first woman to approach the rental office. Though she was given a lukewarm reception, she was nonetheless shown portions of the building.

Next, another 50-year-old woman, Sister Joan Keller, who is white, a nun, and who had been a shelter provider, visited the rental offices. She was shown a "grand tour" and given more information than Mitchell.

After Keller, Daniela Moore, a young, light-skinned woman of mixed race went to the offices; she was not shown around but was given an application.

Finally, a young African-American woman, Crystal Smith, visited the rental office to see if she could rent an apartment; she had to wait for an hour before anyone would even speak to her. Even then, she was not allowed inside the building or given a tour. She had one child accompanying her.

When the women reconvened to discuss their experiences, they quickly realized that African-American women were treated differently than white or lighter-skinned women. It was also apparent that older women and women without children were treated better than younger women

and those with children. This perceived discrimination became another rallying point.

The women, together with other CCH members, then organized rallies and marches at Presidential Towers. They did a "move-in," where they pulled up at Presidential Towers with a U-Haul and announced that they were moving in. However, hundreds of police officers blocked them. The women also protested at a board meeting at the bank that planned to help bail out Presidential Towers. They effectively shut down the board meeting, and the bank backed out of its support. The women also helped organize a sit-in at the McDonald's restaurant that was located inside one building of Presidential Towers, disrupting lunch for the many Loop business people eating there. All these actions drew attention to the discrimination taking place at Presidential Towers and to the lack of affordable housing for low-income women and children.

Eventually, the developers of Presidential Towers agreed to set aside seven percent of the units for low-income residents, and they gave a lump sum to the Low-Income Trust Fund. The women had "won" the issue and had successfully organized, led, and participated in a drive to secure low-income housing.

## Next Steps

Bolstered by their success at Presidential Towers, many of the women who had been involved in the Saturday workshops began discussing the need to secure housing for themselves. Seeing the abandoned buildings that littered the city, the women wondered if they could develop their own living space.

Along with CCH leaders, they looked into buying an abandoned building and creating a housing cooperative for low-income homeless women and children, one which would include services such as child care and job training classes. The idea for the Brand New Beginnings Co-op was born.

The first task was to locate a building. The women chose a 24-unit building at 58th Street and Michigan Avenue, drawn by the neighborhood's good schools and the building's proximity to public transportation. The women then began the long process of securing funding for the project, buying the building through the city's abandoned properties program, being trained to become co-op owners, developing bylaws, and becoming a corporation.

During the past few years, the project vacillated, at times coming to a standstill. At the time of the research, however, the project was in its final stages. Funding from the city had been secured, and most of the women originally involved in the project were still involved. The building was funded by a loan from LaSalle Bank, the Department of Housing, the Illinois Housing and Development Authority (IHDA), and a city loan. As the lawyers discussed last-minute details, the construction companies readied for rehabilitating the building. However, the project went from co-op to a subsidized rental building for low-income women and children. Through hard work and perseverance, the women made their vision come alive.

## How They Did It

CCH leaders used several techniques for organizing the women in the shelters. Once a month, coalition organizers held meetings at the shelters, where they listened closely to the women's concerns. Out of these meetings, representatives from each shelter were chosen to attend a monthly Saturday meeting at the coalition. This group of women formed the Women's Coordinating Committee.

Sometimes the coalition offered basic organizing trainings or workshops on basic life skills. These were also held on Saturdays and were open to all women involved in WEP. Finally, a Women's Advisory Committee, made up of non-homeless women who are professionals and service providers, helped secure resources for members of WEP and brainstorms ideas for group activities.

The most important aspect of WEP—the component that the women named as critical to both their initial and sustained involvement—was the focus on each woman "sharing the story" of her experience with homelessness. Time after time, each participant who was interviewed for this project agreed it was important "to hear survival stories" of other women who had experienced or were experiencing homelessness. By making the women's experiences and lives central to the group's activities, WEP has been able to tackle the issues most important to its members.

The project also let women talk about their experiences and problems without fear of judgment or retaliation. One woman, Tania, a 27-year-old resident of a South Side shelter, said some women were uncomfortable telling their case managers or shelter providers about problems in the shelters; some women even had difficult relationships with the staff at these shelters. The women needed to have a space

where they could talk about their problems without fear of being evicted from the shelter. The women could talk about other hurtful parts of their lives without being judged for their decisions or actions. The women also received child care, bus tokens, or meals, which also helped support their attendance at the Saturday meetings.

The content of the meetings varied. At some meetings, the women shared prayers or positive thoughts, told stories, or sang songs. It seemed to be important to the women to have the freedom to share whatever ideas they wanted to, in whatever form they desired. Neither religion nor spirituality were "pushed" on the women, said one participant, but the women were encouraged to think about spirituality or seek spiritual comfort and community outside the shelter.

The meetings also addressed the women's immediate needs. One young woman, Sheila, who was homeless as a result of domestic violence, told me she did not have the identification needed to obtain a job, since she had only recently moved to Chicago. She recounted how organizers at WEP walked her through the process of getting a state ID. Although the organizers emphasize organizing for long-term structural change—as opposed to "Band-Aid" solutions—they also acknowledged the importance of meeting short-term needs.

Similarly, another woman, Toni, had trouble balancing her budget and paying her bills; she was also looking for a job and needed experience in going on job interviews. The WEP addressed the women's needs for basic life skills by providing workshops or trainings on particular skills. For example, they might conduct a workshop on resume writing, computer skills, or stress management. These workshops helped the women obtain basic skills for obtaining a job and living independently.

## What Worked . . .

The greatest strength of the Women's Empowerment Project has been the focus on women sharing their stories. WEP members I spoke with repeatedly described the importance of "being heard" and "hearing stories." Personal narrative is an important tool for empowering people and organizing for social change. It also helps support the work of the shelter providers. Moreover, the meetings gave women a place to talk about their grievances with shelter life while helping to diffuse those problems. One shelter provider, Delilah, said that the work of WEP "reinforces the

positive work" that goes on at shelters and gives shelter providers information about housing issues they may not even have been aware of.

The tactics used by the organizers of the coalition played an important role as well. One former board member, Renee, remarked that the organizers at the coalition are "O.K. with failure" and understand the need to address long-term goals, as well as immediate needs. Likewise, organizers for the most part are consistent in their visits to the shelters and in their actions with the women, which builds trust within the group. Another former board member, Katie, said WEP benefits from the people who act as intermediaries (shelter providers, coalition members). When one shelter provider, Joan, became involved in an action against Presidential Towers, it demonstrated to shelter residents that she cared about the issue of homelessness and was willing to stand with the women in their fight.



The organizing model used by the coalition is based on participation. The women themselves played an active role in their own training and organizing. The basic organizing skills workshops also coalesced a committed core of people, some of whom became leaders in the movement. Through shared experiences, they forged a common identity and commitment to the cause. By maintaining the trainings and recruiting new women who saw the success of previous participants, women were attracted to and remained involved in the movement. Finally, these organizing skills must be "taken to the streets," as one participant put it, so the women can see the importance of knowledge put to action.

By far, the comment made most often by participants in the Brand New Beginnings Project was that the women had "ownership" of each project. From acquiring the build-

ing to designing the apartments, to fund-raising and developing building rules and guidelines, the women have been primary decision makers. One formerly homeless woman, Angela, talked about the importance of having input into the design of the apartments in the Brand New Beginnings building. Designing a building for families with several children is a challenge: living spaces must provide optimal room and enable mothers to monitor their children from different areas of the apartment. Security was another big issue. Having a secure building and the option of a doubly secure room in the apartment (in this case, the women opted for a double lock on the bathroom door as well as on the front door) was important for women who had experienced domestic violence. The women also wanted a community space for those who lived at the building as well as the space for a potential child care center.

### . . .and What Didn't Work

There were numerous obstacles to the acquisition and development of the Brand New Beginnings property; however, some of these problems were beyond control of coalition members and the board members of Brand New Beginnings.

*The three biggest obstacles were:*

- Inability to retain the initial developers, three of whom dropped out of the project, and thus made the development process that much more lengthy.
- Multiple sources of funding.
- The coalition's tenuous relationship with the city.

One of the biggest problems that the Brand New Beginnings Project faced was the dismissal and/or loss of several developers. At the time of the research the group was working with its fourth developer, who appeared able to see this project through to the end. However, when he was hired in January 1998, he was basically starting from scratch, trying to secure funding and re-doing the entire budget, since costs had changed over the years. At the suggestion of Della Mitchell and with the approval of Brand New Beginnings board members, the concept of BNB was changed from that of a co-op to a low-income rental building. With this change, the fourth developer was able to secure adequate funding from the city and private lenders. According to coalition members, HUD and city officials were reluctant to subsidize a co-op run by homeless women, assuming that they would not be able to run the co-op efficiently and/or adequately.

Earlier failures to obtain city funding stalled the project, since funding from HUD and others depended on the city for matching funds. One improvement, suggested one developer, would be more involvement by key players at CCH, such as the director, who might have more clout with the city than the organizers or BNB board members.

The political climate and the tenuous relationship between the city and the coalition, which had battled the city and city policies on several occasions, made this venture difficult. Even though Brand New Beginnings and CCH are two separate entities, the coalition is connected to BNB in its role as the parent group. Because Brand New Beginnings got its start out of the Women's Empowerment Project at the Coalition, as such it has ties to the Coalition, even though it is not a Coalition-funded or driven project. However, as Brand New Beginnings changed some of its plans to accommodate the funders, i.e., changing the project's structure from a co-op to a low-income rental unit, support from the city followed.

The multiple sources of funding presented another challenge. Usually, a "small" project like the \$2.7 million, BNB gut rehabilitation has only one funder; however, having four lending institutions complicated matters. Four sets of requirements for securing and developing the property have to be met before the project can move into the construction stage. For example, every group has different rules for the management agreement and the agreement with the architect. The city wants to have the power to evict tenants who do not pay their rent; IHDA is more laid-back in its approach to the management agreement. Brand New Beginnings members, on the other hand, want to make sure that those who do not pay their rent don't end up homeless again. Accommodating all these requirements is tedious and time consuming. But, until the requirements were met, the project could not move forward.

Other problems were subtler. The women involved with the project encountered many funders and government officials who held false stereotypes about homeless women. There is a great stigma attached to homelessness, and the women felt this when they visited city officers at times. Some felt that they were not being taken seriously or that people didn't understand that homelessness affected women differently than men. This often prevented funders and even developers from taking on the project. In addition, having social services in the building raised other considerations. Before such services can be proposed, funding for them must be secured. This often held up funding negotia-

tions, since the original plan was to have social services and a child care center on the ground floor. Not surprisingly, potential funders wanted to see how those services would be funded by other groups; however, this funding never came through.

## Conclusion and Looking Ahead: Ideas for Further Research and the Next "Brand New Beginnings"

Given a different political climate, a clientele with more capital, more consistent developers, and more support from the city, this project might have taken only a few years. However, it is remarkable that many of the women originally involved in the project are still involved. The success of this project might make it easier to get funding and government support for Brand New Beginnings II.

Developers suggested several ways to improve future BNB projects:

- Keep accurate records of the development process, since it is often hard to rely on one's memory to understand the long development process.
- Have the city and HUD on board with funding before securing other funding. (BNB organized the women first, secured some private funding, and then sought city funding for the project.)
- Organize or choose a group of women to be part of the board/co-op. This way, the women don't have to wait several years for the funding, which might prevent them from dropping out of the project. However, this defeats the purpose of having the women involved at all stages of development.
- Hire a person full-time to direct the project, because development and fund-raising are time-consuming and require constant attention.
- Have only one big lender for the project to simplify negotiations.

These suggestions can help improve the efficiency with which other projects might be developed that are similar to Brand New Beginnings. Since the development process was so tedious, it might be helpful to have developers be as much a part of the project development as the co-op and coalition members themselves.

In addition, I recommend several areas for further research. First, in my interviews with the women involved in WEP, many mentioned their experiences with welfare-to-work programs and the problems inherent in these pro-

grams. It would be worthwhile to explore how the new welfare reforms have affected the lives of homeless women.

Second, according to some of the women, welfare-to-work programs contributed to their continued transience and displacement from jobs and/or housing; the jobs they secured through these programs were not high-paying, stable jobs with benefits. The women were also stigmatized in the workplace by bosses or colleagues who labeled them as welfare-to-work employees, treating them as somehow different or incompetent.

Securing a building permit was also difficult. Since the project took so long, the building deteriorated over time, and the estimated costs of the rehab increased. As construction costs changed, so did plans for the building design. And when architectural plans change, they require approval by a variety of city departments. Thus, every change had to receive the blessings of a dozen different people. One suggestion is to start the permit process earlier and to assume it will take at least two years to secure a building permit. For further research, one might look at the structure of and process of development in creating affordable housing in Chicago. One question to study is how the city might act as a "gatekeeper" to the development process for certain groups of people.

Finally, it is important to continue to research and understand the experience of homelessness using gender as an analytical tool. My own research has revealed a dearth of articles on homeless women; while race, immigration status and ethnicity figure prominently into the analysis of homelessness, there is a startling lack of information on gender and homelessness in the literature. It is nigh impossible to talk about homeless families—a growing number of which are headed by mothers who are single—without speaking of gender.

Apart from these nuts-and-bolts suggestions, it is important not to lose sight of the human side the project. As one formerly homeless woman said when telling me about her involvement in WEP, "When I was homeless, they picked me up and dusted me off, and now I do the same for other women who are going through this." Sharing and listening are as important as action and cooperation in agitating for social change and in eradicating homelessness. Brand New Beginnings would not have been created or developed without the Women's Empowerment Project, which has long supported and organized homeless women all over the Chicago region. The process of supporting homeless women be agents of social change in their own

lives and in the community is important for the long-term development of a project like Brand New Beginnings. It is also important to have the support in place, from developers to city officials, to create long-term results in addressing women's homelessness.

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# Building Participation and Relationships in a Complex Community: Adapting to Change in the North River Neighborhood

Joel D. Bookman

**Joel D. Bookman** is Director of Joel D. Bookman & Associates and former Executive Director of the North River Commission.

*It would seem that the more participants we engage in this participative universe, the more we can access its potential and the wiser we can become.*

Margaret J. Wheatley, Leadership and the New Science

When Field Museum interns Gretchen Fox and Hubert Izienicki began their research in Albany Park they gave leaders of the North River Commission (NRC) an unusual chance to assess this community located on Chicago's Northwest Side. The Field Museum inquiry amassed fresh, meaningful information based on listening, communicating, observing and participating in the neighborhood. Since its inception, the 40-year-old NRC has developed an intricate network of more than 100 civic groups, businesses, and institutions. With the help of Gretchen and Hubert, a web of relationships evolved to energize and nurture a new wave of participation and a greater wisdom about the community.

## Organizing in the Complex Community

Reviving inner-city communities depends on thousands of daily decisions. Investment decisions are made by multinational corporations, regional banks, public agencies, and neighborhood homeowners. Decisions affecting public safety are made by police superintendents, community

policing committees, national drug czars—and local gang-bangers. Neighborhood health is influenced by family nutrition, school immunizations, state Medicaid reimbursement policies, and federal milk subsidies.



At any time in a community's history, its condition depends on countless environmental factors and "decision-maker" choices that affect the well-being of its residents, businesses, and institutions. The community is dynamic. Its variables always are getting better and getting worse. The essence of a community depends on the perceptions and interactions of its participants and their ability to adapt to their changing environment. The community, in short, is a complex adaptive system—an organized, coherent entity in which physical conditions, perceptions, and the social order constantly change.

Since the 1960s, community organizations typically were formed to solve a problem—for example, to stop crime, to prevent school decline, to eradicate slums, or to attract investment. Their efforts were predicated on a fairly simple, linear, stimulus/response equation:

- A slum building is jeopardizing the community. The community group organizes tenants and residents to pressure the landlord. The landlord is forced to fix up the building.
- Crime endangers residents. The block organizes to pressure the police. The police assigns more officers and boosts enforcement, and crime drops.
- Schools are performing poorly. Residents pressure the Board of Education to open a new school to relieve over-crowding and improve education.

These elementary examples are elegant in their simplicity. The issues are straightforward. Neighbors can unite for a cause that is clear and specific. People get involved in their neighborhoods; they learn to “own” their communities—and to make a difference. Yet this approach is self-limiting. No community world is linear. A narrow focus impairs our peripheral vision. We see only a small part of our environment. The problems, solutions, and the participation of potential problem-solvers are constrained. The world is not that simple.

## The North River Commission View

Since 1962, the leaders of the North River Commission have observed their community through a different lens: a wide-angle view, in which the subject blends into its surroundings. In the NRC world view, all things communal are connected. Process is as important as product. Change comes through learning, relating, and interacting around a web of concern. The NRC approach seeks points of influence, what J. H. Holland calls “levers.” In this model, leaders seek and seed the information, relationships, and circumstances that will trigger reactions that will, in turn, help the community adapt and thrive. NRC is an agent for change.

In the 1960s and 1970s, while many groups around the nation were organizing residents against the oppressive forces of big business, banks, and government, NRC went the other way. Banks, corporations, hospitals, and university leaders sat at the NRC table with local residents to protect and maintain the community. In the fight against blight, neighborhood institutions were seen as colleagues rather

than the enemy. Struggling businesses were viewed as partners in revamping the neighborhood’s economy, rather than parasites sucking the resources from a declining commercial strip. Anyone with a self-interest in an issue was invited to participate, based on the principle that people who live, work, and do business in the community have not only the right to participate in the decisions that affect them, but the responsibility to work together for the common good.

When housing conditions declined in the early 1970s, NRC confounded the conventional wisdom and responded with an economic development program. By reviving Lawrence Avenue, Albany Park’s Main Street, leaders sent a signal of neighborhood faith and investment. Creating the Lawrence Avenue Development Corporation (LADCOR) united residents and business owners. Their efforts created jobs, expanded shopping options, eliminated vacancies, and led to renovated buildings and increased property values. As a result, residential investment grew. Tenants were willing to live behind a viable commercial strip. They paid the rent with income from retail employment. Landlords could charge rents sufficient to renovate their properties. Property values rose, providing lenders with sufficient collateral to give rehabilitation loans. A spiral of hope, investment, and optimism prevailed, thanks to NRC’s sowing the seeds for revival.

## Adapting to Ethnic Change

When the Jewish middle-class left Albany Park in the suburban exodus of the 1960s and 1970s, NRC welcomed new immigrants to its table. Leaders and staff invited incoming Korean residents to join in the decision-making, helped them settle in homes and start businesses, and packaged the development of the 76-unit Moo Goong Terrace Senior Housing. During the last two decades, Thai, Malaysian, Bosnian, Cambodian, Islamic, and Latino organizations joined NRC to plan for a brighter future.

The effort was not without hazards. In 1984, NRC planned with Korean leaders to build a retail-medical office building to serve the neighbors and new immigrants, when a group of previously silent Korean business leaders expressed their opposition. It seems that while NRC was working with an organization that purported to represent the Korean community, there were in fact seven similar organizations, each representing different political factions from their homeland. A project thought to enjoy widespread support was instead opposed by a majority of Korean associa-

tions. Ultimately, the \$2 million Kimball Plaza was built, but only after promises were made to work with each of the major associations to develop similar properties. From 1975 to 1990, Korean businesses in Albany Park grew in number from five to more than 500. It was estimated that 24 percent of the Albany Park population was Korean-born by 1988.

By the early 1990s, however, that had changed. Successful Korean business owners moved their homes to the suburbs, following the paths of their Jewish predecessors to Skokie, Northbrook, and beyond. Many began to move their businesses as well. By 1998, less than five percent of the community was Korean. In their place arose a substantial growth in the Latino population, from approximately 26 percent in 1990 to nearly 39 percent of the community in 2000. A large group of South Asians, Middle Eastern people, and Eastern Europeans also had joined the mix of cultures.

In 1994, NRC and LADCOR were recognized by the National Committee on Immigration and Refugee Protection (NCIRP). State and county officials planned to rebuild the Lawrence Avenue bridge over the Chicago River. For two years, residents, businesses, shoppers, and diners would be seriously inconvenienced, forced to travel several miles out of their way, which in turn would increase congestion on nearby residential streets and interfere with the operation of several dozen businesses employing more than 500 neighbors. NRC coalesced those with a self-interest to meet, advocate, and negotiate with public officials. After a six-month battle, the team forced the state to rebuild the bridge in 43 days rather than two years.

NCIRP recognized NRC, not because of the tremendous victory, but because hundreds of residents and business owners from more than a dozen different ethnic groups had worked side-by-side to effect change and build lasting relationships. They noted that the negotiating team included a Korean furniture store owner, a Vietnamese restaurant owner, a Thai family from the adjacent block, a Jewish merchant, a Latino building owner, and a Palestinian baker. As they shared strategies and coffee, they learned about each other and their cultures. They developed new relationships and new respect for each other, not to mention a means for future planning and cooperation.

By the late 1990s, the Albany Park Chamber of Commerce was identifying the area as a world community in its marketing materials. The world of Albany Park continued to evolve. The social activism of the early years of the NRC had long since dwindled. Residents still would unite

to fight a major crisis—an ill-conceived bridge project, a gang war, or a school closing—but community organizing had become vastly more difficult.

- Communication was more challenging than ever. Thirty-nine languages were spoken at the local elementary school, and many of the parents spoke no English at all.
- The new economy hit Albany Park with full force. Escalating rents, health care costs, and low-wage jobs for immigrants forced families to become two-, three-, or four-wage earner households. The stay-at-home moms who led the fight to fix up Lawrence Avenue in the 1970s were largely nonexistent now.
- Similar to Boston's West End Italian immigrants (described by Herbert Gans in his study of *The Urban Villagers*), most newcomers interacted with the larger community in school and at work as they pursued their piece of the American dream. Yet their social networks were internal to their own ethnic community. They generally were unwilling and unlikely to coalesce with other ethnic groups to improve the broader environment. Instead, many belonged to a church or social service organization and relied on the professional staff of that agency to participate with NRC and communicate their concerns.

## The Research

*If we are seeking resilient organizations, a property prized in self-organizing systems, information needs to be our key ally.*

Wheatley, Leadership and the New Science

The Field Museum research was an opportunity to learn more about community changes and to answer the question, "How to reach people not currently engaged with NRC?" Gretchen and Hubert supplied the conduit for gathering current information and enabled an established group to hear new voices.

As a successful 40-year-old community group, NRC faces a never-ending struggle to renew itself and to represent a rapidly changing community. Veteran leaders bring experience, but they tend to be drawn to residents and other leaders who are more established and with whom they are most familiar. New residents may be intimidated by those with extensive experience, knowledge, or positions of power and prestige. Behavior patterns repeat themselves. Communication channels that have worked well in the past continue to be used, though others might now be

appropriate. NRC is committed to overcoming these challenges.

Gretchen and Hubert sat on the benches at River Park, talking with and listening to strangers. They wandered the grounds of Roosevelt High School, chatting with students and faculty. They stood on the street corners of Lawrence Avenue, noting comments and observations of shoppers and shopkeepers. Unobtrusively, informally, they gathered feelings, opinions, and ideas that NRC leaders could not have obtained otherwise. Some examples:

- Community policing meetings proclaimed the success of “zero-tolerance” policies at Roosevelt High School, lauding the effects of personal searches and rigorous law enforcement. But reports from the researchers indicated that students expressed fear not of gang activity, but of aggressive police who, in their eyes, searched, harassed, and threatened innocent teens.
- A youth theater project enjoyed considerable success in creating forums for performances throughout the community. But participation was limited, they learned, because the brother of one of the actors was in a gang—so others were hesitant to rehearse in a facility deemed “gang turf.”
- Many of the soccer players, strollers, and picnickers at River Park were new to the United States. Most spoke little English. They had some awareness of their own church, ethnic association, or local school, but few knew people from other ethnic groups, associations, businesses, or the larger community. And they knew little about the resources that could help them.

## An Innovative Proposal: The North River Electronic Village

From their research, Gretchen and Hubert suggested creating what they called a “Virtual Community Center” for the North River area (see Fox and Izienicki article in this issue). Using computer technology, they proposed a North River portal that would unite representatives of different ethnic organizations and area schools in planning a Web site to disseminate information for people throughout Albany Park. The site would include information on housing, jobs, education, social activities, and community associations. It would be accessible at stations throughout the neighborhood, including the libraries, schools, businesses, organizations, and CTA terminals. The information would be available, accessible, and instantly translated into six languages.

NRC leaders welcomed the concept. It offered the opportunity to improve communication among and between groups and individuals. The North River “Electronic Village,” as it became known, would transmit information on a variety of subjects to large numbers of people. It dangled a hook—the excitement of new technology that many organizations already were grappling with—to influence far more people in building community.

NRC and Field Museum researchers convened focus groups to consider the proposal. Joining in the discussion were representatives from Korean-American Community Services, Cambodian Association of Illinois, the Malaysian Association, the Latin-American Pentecostal Church, Islamic Center of Chicago, Roosevelt High School Local School Council, Swedish Covenant Hospital, Albany Bank & Trust Company, Albany Park Chamber of Commerce, and North Park University. It was met with interest, enthusiasm, and the desire to pursue it further.

## The Results — So Far

Local organizations have expressed serious interest in the North River Electronic Village. The Albany Park Chamber of Commerce and area businesses are willing to help sponsor the site. North Park University representatives said they would consider assisting through their technology programs, as well as their Centers for Korean, Middle Eastern, and Latin American Studies. NRC leaders are exploring possible funding for research, development, and start-up costs. Each of the community associations is trying to increase their internal capacity to use the new technology. In 2002, the NRC Education Task Force will convene residents, parents, and administrators from eight elementary and middle schools from the North River neighborhood to address overcrowding, capital improvements, school safety, and curriculum. It is anticipated that committed individuals and organizations will test many of the concepts from the North River Electronic Village.

Many social commentators bemoan the decrease in civic participation in today’s society. In *Bowling Alone*, Robert Putnam documents the loss in detail. According to the General Social Survey, “. . . in the ten short years between 1985 and 1994, active involvement in community organizations in this country fell by 45 percent.” He adds that, “In the last third of the [twentieth] century . . . active involvement in face-to-face organizations has plummeted.”

meted . . . the broad picture is one of declining membership in community organizations."

NRC stands in the forefront of those who refuse to accept these societal trends as inevitable. The North River Electronic Village symbolizes the commitment of NRC leaders. They are attempting to use new technologies with the old, to expand communication and to increase face-to-face involvement of those who might otherwise remain isolated. They are using information as their ally.

## A Complex Adaptive Community

The answer is to create the conditions for self-organization through simple rules under which massive and diverse experimentation can happen . . . Because the parts of a Complex Adaptive System are adaptable and embedded within a unique context, every change within a CAS can stimulate other changes that we could not expect . . . Therefore, rather than agonizing over plans, the goal is to generate a "good enough plan" and begin to observe what happens. Then, modifications can occur in an evolutionary fashion (Plsek 2001).

The concept of a virtual community center has captured the imagination of several leaders of organizations in the NRC network. From Field Museum research and NRC focus groups, new information was collected and shared. Community leaders gathered seemingly disparate bits of data and distributed them to a wide audience. The free flow of information generated exciting ideas and new relationships.

Representatives from six ethnic organizations, businesses, and institutions began a dialogue that has connected their energy, skills, and influence around a broad array of community issues. Coming together to consider technology, they discussed crime and education, housing and immigration, business and social organization. Their wisdom grew.

Koreans and Malaysians compared funding ideas. Bankers and hospital administrators shared strategies for hiring multilingual employees. From a discussion about the North River Electronic Village, Cambodian Association participants explored how the portal could be used to share information about housing opportunities for members forced from their homes by an explosion of condominium conversions. Together, NRC and Cambodian leaders united in an Affordable Housing Task Force to help new immigrants establish co-operatives rather than face displacement

from gentrification. Others are creating "good enough" plans for quality education.

The North River Electronic Village is in its infancy. NRC has secured high-speed Internet access and expanded its computer capacity. Proposals have been drafted to fund the project.

Field Museum research provided an opportunity to collect new and better information about the changing North River community. Information was shared with new immigrants and longtime residents to increase participation. These efforts have spawned relationships that will help the NRC organize and renew its neighborhood and itself, adapt to change, foster "massive and diverse experimentation," and seed waves of future participation in its complex community.

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*Photograph courtesy of Brenda Sherwood, North River Commission*

# Identifying Assets and Facilitating Social Networks in the Diverse Communities of Albany Park

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*"Accessibility...is not always realized; it depends not least on forms of social organization."*

Hannerz (1980 p.116)

## Introduction

This paper is based on research done for the North River Commission as part of The Field Museum's Urban Research Initiative. Research was conducted during the summer of 1999 in the parks, businesses, churches and community centers of Albany Park, a vibrant neighborhood on Chicago's Northwest Side. Bounded by Foster Street to the north, Montrose Avenue to the south, Pulaski Road to the west, and the Chicago River to the east, Albany Park's physical geography is diverse. Quiet residential streets, city parks and schools, the Chicago River, and a vibrant commercial corridor along Lawrence Avenue provide a backdrop for the dynamic social and cultural life of this urban neighborhood.

The North River Commission was interested in gaining useful information about the assets possessed by Albany Park's changing ethnic communities, and learning about the challenges facing these groups. In its 40-year history, the North River Commission has built strong relationships with many businesses and institutions in the neighborhood. However the Commission's ties to smaller community organizations—particularly organizations serving the neighborhood's many ethnic communities—are not as well-developed.

Project interns, along with Joel Bookman, the Commission's then Executive Director, decided that the research should focus on discovering the social assets possessed by Albany Park's ethnic communities, and devising ways for these assets to be integrated into a vibrant social

network connecting Albany Park community groups, institutions, businesses and individuals. Such a social network could work collectively to help people and groups access resources necessary to address neighborhood challenges, thus making Albany Park a more vibrant, safer place to live and work.

The following four open-ended research questions were designed to elicit information from diverse sources about the assets and resources present in the neighborhood, the concerns of people living and working there, people's overall perceptions of the neighborhood, and their suggestions for improving the quality of life and work in Albany Park:

- What are the social assets available for public use in Albany Park?
- What are the concerns or "hot issues" facing people who live and work in the neighborhood?
- What are the community needs that are not being met by organizations, institutions, and businesses?
- What should be done to improve Albany Park for residents? For community organizations? For businesses?

## Methodology

A variety of social science research techniques, such as participant observation, open-ended interviews, focus groups, and asset mapping were employed to gather rich, meaningful data that addressed the established research questions. This data could then be used by the North River Commission to build strong relationships with and among Albany Park community organizations, business, and local institutions.

## History of the Neighborhood

Albany Park is an historic port-of-entry neighborhood for new immigrants and refugees. The polyethnic character of the neighborhood has endured for decades, even as its residents' countries of origin have changed. Albany Park experienced its first significant growth as an urban neighborhood in the 1930s and '40s when European-Jewish immigrants moved to the area, constructing houses and apartments, and building successful businesses. As this upwardly-mobile ethnic population began to move to the northern suburbs in the 1960s, Korean immigrant groups began to move into the neighborhood. Although many from Albany Park's Korean community have also moved to the northern and western suburbs, the influence of this population is still significant, as many Korean-owned businesses still line Lawrence Avenue. In fact, Lawrence Avenue is known as "Little Korea," and Korean-Americans living outside the neighborhood often return to shop at Korean markets on Lawrence Avenue.

## Albany Park Today

Today, Albany Park is home to large Latino and Southeast Asian populations, as well as growing Bosnian and Middle-Eastern populations. According to residents and local community organizations, Albany Park is the city's most ethnically diverse neighborhood. A Mexican bakery, an Arabic video store, and a Korean dentist office occupy storefronts along a short stretch of Lawrence Avenue. The diversity of Albany Park's community organizations is, itself, indicative of the neighborhood's ethnic and cultural composition. The Bosnian Refugee Association, the Cambodian Association of Illinois, and the Latino Pentecostal Church were the newest members of the North River Commission in the summer of 1999.

In addition to being highly culturally diverse, Albany Park is also a young neighborhood. Many young families have made Albany Park their home. The age of the neighborhood, as well as its diversity, is reflected in Albany Park's crowded public schools. At the time of this study, over 60 languages and dialects were spoken at one local high school, and a local elementary school enrolled 100 kindergarten

students who spoke no English at the beginning of the school year.

Another significant dimension of Albany Park's diversity is the economic diversity of its residents. One of the reasons Albany Park is the first stop for many of Chicago's new immigrant populations is the affordability of housing and services in the area. Recent housing trends are especially illustrative of the persistent economic disparity in Albany Park. Housing in the heart of the neighborhood—along tree-lined streets off of Lawrence and Kedzie Avenues—is predominantly tenement-style rental housing. Much of this housing is in substandard condition, with faulty plumbing and wiring. Meanwhile, most houses on the outskirts of the neighborhood are modest, well-kept single family homes. These owner-occupied houses belong to Albany Park's small, but stable, middle-class residents, many of whom moved to the neighborhood as immigrants decades ago. At the time of this study, Albany Park's rental housing market was beginning to face pressure from developers interested



in converting rental properties into high-end condominiums well out of the financial reach of their current occupants. Paradoxically, these condominiums would be sold to higher income people drawn to the neighborhood by its cultural diversity and affordability.

## Relevance of a Heterogeneous Neighborhood

Albany Park is a fluid place. People and groups move in and out of the area, changing the social, cultural, and economic fabric of the neighborhood as they go. It follows that the social and cultural assets possessed by neighborhood people are as dynamic as the neighborhood itself. Challenges faced by Albany Park residents are somewhat less fluid than are neighborhood assets—many challenges faced by Albany Park are typical of urban neighborhoods. However, people's responses to neighborhood challenges reflect the diverse neighborhood they live in, and demonstrate their desire to draw on their assets to improve the quality of life in Albany Park.

## Findings

As the research proceeded throughout the summer of 1999, five distinct themes emerged: *Youth, Safety, Services, Affordability and Diversity*. Each was consistently cited by informants as the sites of strong neighborhood assets. Interestingly, these five themes also emerged in discussions about the challenges facing Albany Park. This correlation between assets and challenges suggests that people recognize and are willing to use their social assets to address neighborhood challenges. In fact, when informants were asked what should be done to improve the quality of life in Albany Park, they suggested creative ways in which existing neighborhood assets could be used to address challenges.

Research findings are presented below, arranged according to the five research themes that emerged during the course of fieldwork. It is important to look broadly at both the assets and the challenges present in Albany Park, because different people have different assets to offer the community, face different challenges, and have different ideas about how assets should be used to ameliorate neighborhood conditions. Further, although findings are arranged according to distinct themes, none of those themes is exclusive of the others. All five themes run, inextricably through life in Albany Park. By looking broadly at Albany Park's social and business fabric, potential linkages can be identified. This process of mapping of Albany Park's many assets is an effective way to promote and facilitate resource-sharing and collaboration so that diverse groups can work together to create solutions to common challenges.

## Findings: Youth

During the research period, youth were a strong presence on the streets, in the parks, at community organizations, and in neighborhood shops. They were described as "the pulse" of Albany Park by a woman who facilitates a youth group at a local church. The talent of youth and their capacity to contribute to the betterment of neighborhoods is immense, but they are often overlooked because of their perceived immaturity and lack of life experience (Kretzmann and McKnight 1993). Albany Park youth have strong cultural identities and many ideas for improving the neighborhood.

Recognizing that youth are a powerful force in the neighborhood—in both positive and sometimes negative ways—many community organizations and churches have formed youth groups and youth programming to capitalize on youth talent and provide a "positive" growth atmosphere. These youth programs were regarded as strong assets as well and provide youth with resources to help address the challenges they face.

## Assets

Strong youth programs were the most commonly mentioned neighborhood assets by informants from many different sectors of the neighborhood. Youth programs are available at a number of area religious institutions, schools, and neighborhood organizations, and researchers were able to spend considerable time meeting with—and participating in—youth groups. Youth programs throughout Albany Park have worked to establish strong social networks. For example, the youth groups at the Cambodian Association of Illinois and at Korean American Community Services have ties with a number of youth groups at other Southeast Asian community organizations on Chicago's North Side. Social networks have also been established between youth organizations and neighborhood service providers. Both Youth Net 17 and the Albany Park Theater Project collaborate with Youth Outreach Services, an organization that provides various counseling services.

Researchers spoke with the organizers of youth programs and with youth themselves about the programs' purposes and goals, and about why they were considered neighborhood assets. Albany Park youth programs fall into two categories: those designed for youth, and those that were more youth-driven. The programs facilitated by adults

tended to focus on keeping youth out of trouble with the police, and building their self-confidence and sense of responsibility. Youth-driven programs, most notably Albany Park Theater Project, provided youth with creative outlets to express themselves. Both types of youth programs enjoyed success and were considered assets by adults and youth.

The reasons that these two different types of youth programs were considered neighborhood assets differed. Adult-facilitated programs designed to keep youth "out of trouble" were considered assets because they provided youth with structured places to go and structured activities in which to participate. Keeping youth away from gangs was a major priority of many Albany Park organizations. To this end, these organizations provide structured, "positive" activities for youth, meanwhile reinforcing the message that gang membership is a "negative" activity.

Examples of successful adult-facilitated youth programs are Chicago Park District Summer Camps and Church Youth Groups. The Park District's summer camps, designed for younger children, mainly consisted of organized sports and art programs. Parents complimented the camps on their quality, but complained that the Park District should expand the programs because they fill up too quickly. Church youth groups provide a structured place for older youth to meet with adult facilitators to discuss religious topics, and also to discuss issues they face at school and at home. At one youth group meeting at this church, the group's advisor talked with the youth about strategies for staying out of gangs.

Youth-driven programs, on the other hand, were considered assets because youth were encouraged to find creative, proactive ways to use their own assets. Youth-driven programs in Albany Park focused on celebrating diversity, helping youth develop strong cultural identities, and encouraged youth to make choices and deal with challenges themselves. Youth-driven groups rated higher among youth than did adult-driven youth groups.

Examples of successful youth-driven groups in Albany Park are Albany Park Theater Project and Youth Net 17. Albany Park Theater Project is a grassroots community theater group founded in 1996, by two young adults with the goal of teaching theater techniques to 13-21 year-old youth, and building community in the process. Youth involved in Albany Park Theater Project developed their performances during "storytelling sessions," where members shared personal, defining experiences with the group,

and then the group decided which of these stories to adapt into stage productions. The goal of Albany Park Theater Project was to help youth define culture and community through their own words and their families' experiences. The group is open to any young person who wants to be involved, and has developed a strong support network in the neighborhood.

Despite the fact that it is run by the Chicago Police Department, Youth Net 17 was cited as one of the most popular youth-driven organizations by Albany Park Youth. Youth Net 17 is a citywide drop-in program for youth ages 8-18. Youth Net 17 is operated out of Roosevelt High School, where youth may participate in free programs and classes, such as writing, sports, and art. Despite the structured space and activities of Youth Net 17, it was most highly valued by youth because participation in structured activities was not mandatory; many youth view Youth Net 17 as a place where they can spend time with their friends doing art projects and listening to music without being harassed for loitering.

## Challenges

### Gangs

Adults and youth alike view gang activity in Albany Park as one of the most serious challenges to neighborhood quality of life. As Albany Park is a young neighborhood, many parents, teachers, and community organizations worry about the proliferation of gang culture in the neighborhood.

Albany Park is an area with a long history of gang activity. In his study of Albany Park gangs, Conquergood (1994) found that the most important function of the gang is to create a "cultural space" for young people who have been marginalized by mainstream society. The cultural space is organized and ruled by gangs and provides "support, attachment, and solidarity against a hostile world (Conquergood 1994).

Youth interviewed for this study seem to understand gang culture better than adults, who only associated gangs with violence. Youth attending a summer art camp at a local park explained that gangs offer young people protection and respect that they cannot get elsewhere. However, even though they have an understanding of gang culture and are able to negotiate gang territories, youth interviewed said that gang violence has escalated in Albany Park and they are

afraid of being caught in the middle of a violent gang confrontation.

Whereas youth saw gangs as a response to the constraints of "adult culture," adults saw gang membership as the result of a lack of structure and "positive" role models. Nearly every community organization contacted during this study had programs in place to promote "positive youth interaction" and to provide youth with alternative activities and role models.

### *Criminalization of Youth*

In 1998, Roosevelt High School posted "Most Wanted" posters in school hallways. These posters showed pictures of students with unexcused absences or tardies and offered rewards for students who turned in these "Most Wanted" students to school officials. Youth were offended by this campaign's blatant portrayal of teens as criminals—an attitude, youth say, which is pervasive throughout the neighborhood. In response to this "Most Wanted" campaign, youth shown on the posters began presenting themselves to school officials and demanding the promised reward.

Youth also feel criminalized by the institution charged with protecting the neighborhood: police. In fact, youth interviewed for this study feared police violence more than they feared gang violence. Youth complained that police harass them and search them unnecessarily if they are suspected of being in a gang. One teen showed researchers a bruise on his forehead where a police officer supposedly threw him against a brick wall to search him. The youth said that non-white teens—especially Latino teens—are harassed by police more often than white teens are. Conquergood (1994) found that one police and media strategy for generating community support for the eradication of gangs is to portray gangs as diseases infecting neighborhood. Gang members are also portrayed as animals preying on innocent neighborhood people. Ultimately, reducing the complexity of gang affiliation and emphasizing its negative aspects may not be the most effective way to protect youth from violent forces.

### *Education*

The overcrowding of local public schools is another effect of Albany Park's many young residents. Parents and youth group advisors complained that youth were not receiving a quality education in the overcrowded environment, and would not be prepared for college, or to enter the job market after graduation. Roosevelt High School and

Hibbard and Haugen Elementary Schools were most often criticized for overcrowding and inadequate education.

### **Response**

Responding to the challenges facing youth in Albany Park is a formidable one. Youth, as a whole, have no political clout, little money and they often receive little respect. However, when asked what should be done to improve the situation for neighborhood youth, the suggestions given reflected the assets already possessed by youth and youth organizations in the neighborhood. This demonstrates neighborhood youth's recognition of the strength of their own assets and the assets of others in addressing challenges. Some suggestions for ways to address challenges confronting youth were:

- A neighborhood establishment—a 24-hour restaurant or a bowling alley—where youth could socialize in the evenings without being harassed by gangs, or hassled by police for loitering.
- Organize mentoring programs where younger children are paired with high school students for tutoring and "gang-alternative" activities. This should be coordinated between local schools.
- Start a neighborhood soccer club for children. Several people said that this would be a good way to facilitate interactions between parents and children from different ethnic groups, because soccer is a popular sport in many cultures.
- Youth should have better access to the Internet and other computer learning tools in public places like such as libraries, community centers, and schools.

### **Findings: Safety**

Safety is a pervasive concern for many people living and working in Albany Park. However, Albany Park residents said that they recognize that safety is an issue facing every urban community, and they believe that Albany Park is safer than many of Chicago's other neighborhoods. Still, residents worry about drug dealing and prostitution taking place on dark streets and sidewalks at night. Most adult informants said that they feel that their homes and streets are safe. Most youth informants also said that they feel safe in the neighborhood, though they worry about gang violence.

## **Assets**

Although safety on neighborhood streets is a major concern of Albany Park residents, most said that they feel safe in their homes. It is important to note that this feeling of security at home was due, in large part, to the strong social networks established in apartment buildings and along owner-occupied blocks of the neighborhood. These networks were typically based on shared cultural backgrounds in the case of apartment buildings and, in the case of homeowners, on personal investment in the safety of neighborhood homes and streets.

Many apartment buildings in Albany Park are occupied solely by tenants from a single ethnic group. These apartment enclaves often provide new immigrants with a sense of comfort and security. Tenants in one Cambodian-occupied building said that they like having friends nearby and felt comfortable allowing their children to visit children in other apartments in the building.

Homeowners on one neighborhood block started a neighborhood "block watch" after a series of car break-ins on their street. This watch is small, but effective, with neighbors trusting each other to call the police if they witness illegal or suspicious activity on the street. Strong leadership makes this "block watch" effective, residents said.

## **Challenges**

While residents generally feel safe in their homes, they have concerns about the safety of other parts of the neighborhood, and much of this concern is related to gang presence in the neighborhood. The presence of gangs in the neighborhood makes people reluctant to visit some area parks, and even makes parents reluctant to send their children to some neighborhood schools. Additionally, many residents have serious doubts about the effectiveness of police in improving neighborhood safety.

## **Gangs**

Fear of being caught in the middle of gang violence prevented many residents from using neighborhood parks and leaving their houses after dark. Albany Park residents said the quality of life in their neighborhood is severely impacted by gang activity as described previously.

## **Police**

Albany Park residents have serious doubts about the effectiveness of police programs to address neighborhood safety concerns. The Chicago Police Department's CAPS (Chicago's Alternative Policing Strategy) Program is designed to facilitate partnerships between police and the community. Regular "beat meetings" are held in the neighborhood, and residents and business owners are encouraged to meet with police to discuss issues affecting the safety of Albany Park. The CAPS Program is a success, according to police. However, neighborhood people were skeptical about the policing program. Non-white residents, in particular, said that the CAPS Program has its own agenda, and does not address the most salient issues facing the neighborhood. It was clear after several conversations with residents about neighborhood policing that distrust is perhaps the greatest barrier to successful linkages between police and residents.

## **Response**

Improving safety in Albany Park is a top priority of residents, businesses, community organizations and the police. Suggestions made about how to go about making Albany Park a safer neighborhood were similar across the different segments of the neighborhood. Suggested steps to be taken to improve neighborhood safety included:

- Organize more neighborhood "block watches." They are often very effective, but require people to take leadership roles.
- Beat cops who patrol the neighborhood on foot should stop into businesses along their beats and get to know storeowners.

Although people agreed on steps to improve neighborhood safety by addressing identified safety challenges, however, they also agreed that language and cultural barriers were preventing Albany Park from organizing to address shared safety challenges. Organizing people who speak many different languages and have different cultural ideas about crime, the police, and safety is the biggest challenge to improving safety in Albany Park.

## *Findings: Services*

The services available to Albany Park residents and businesspeople are varied, and include social services, business services, transportation, and healthcare. Of these services, social services provided by community based organizations were often cited by people as one of the most important assets present in Albany Park. Hannerz (1980) emphasizes the importance of *access* to resources in urban environments, and ethnic-based community organizations are especially important in this neighborhood where many people are new Americans who do not speak English and do not know where or how to access important neighborhood resources and services like markets, schools, health care, and transportation.

### **Assets**

#### *Community Organizations*

Albany Park is fortunate to have many active community-based organizations with strong programs and services. The great majority of these organizations are ethnic organizations serving a particular segment of Albany Park's multiethnic population. Groups such as Korean American Community Services and the Cambodian Association of Illinois have been operating in the neighborhood for over 20 years. Other groups, like the Bosnian Refugee Association, are relative newcomers.

It was clear that the people of Albany Park regarded these community based organizations as strong neighborhood assets. The organizations are tuned in to the specific needs of their specific constituencies, and they have evolved programs and services to meet these needs. These organizations are well known within the neighborhood's tightly knit ethnic communities, and are important assets, especially for new immigrants.

Non-ethnic community organizations and centers also exist in the neighborhood, though they are less well known to residents. The Albany Park Community Center provides childcare services and English as a Second Language (ESL) classes for adults, as well as opening a food pantry several days a week.



Two of the strongest community organizations cited by residents and the services they provide are:

#### The Cambodian Association of Illinois

- ESL classes
- Citizenship classes
- Youth programs
- Employment programs
- Tenant Rights workshops
- Health workshops
- Parenting classes
- Cultural/dance programs
- Women's outreach program

#### Korean American Community Services

- ESL classes
- Employment assistance
- Daycare services
- Senior housing
- Healthcare and healthcare referrals

#### *Businesses*

The Albany Park business community is another strong neighborhood asset. Most businesses along Lawrence Avenue are small independent businesses owned by people who live in or around the neighborhood. People living in the neighborhood are able to shop for goods from their native countries without travelling outside the neighborhood, and people from outside the neighborhood often come to Lawrence Avenue to shop. One Korean-American man said that his family used to live in the neighborhood, and they still drive in from the northern suburbs to go to Korean markets on Lawrence Avenue.

## *Transportation*

The presence of the Chicago Transit Authority Brown Line train in Albany Park—especially at Kimball Station—was described as an asset for the neighborhood, and also for the entire city. The trains make it possible for people to come to work and shop in Albany Park and also make the Loop and other areas of the City accessible for Albany Park residents.

## *Healthcare*

Nearly every community and religious organization interviewed during this study mentioned the availability of healthcare at nearby Swedish Covenant Hospital as an asset to the area. Many ethnic-based community groups and religious organizations are working to educate their clients and congregations about the importance of preventative care. Health fairs are held throughout the year at the hospital, local churches, and at some community organizations. Sometimes, these health fairs target certain ethnic groups, because different groups have different ideas about when healthcare is required and who should administer it.

Residents were also excited about the new Wellness Center in Roosevelt High School, which was slated to open in the fall of 1999. The Wellness Center is a place where students and other people from the community can receive healthcare and health education. This was mentioned as a neighborhood asset because of its focus on preventative care, and also because it is an accessible link between the school, the community, and the hospital.

## *Religious Institutions*

Area religious institutions were cited by many as neighborhood assets, not only for the religious guidance they provided, but also for their community outreach and community building activities. For example, several churches operate a food pantry that is open seven days a week. One Catholic Church runs a youth Confirmation class where young people gathered to talk about the life issues they face. Furthermore, a neighborhood healthcare advocate said that religious institutions are some of the best places to distribute information about classes, workshops, meetings, and health fairs. Over 60 percent of the people in Albany Park attend weekly religious services, and they place a lot of stock in the information and advice given to them by religious leaders.

## *Challenges*

Repetition of services among community organizations is one of the biggest challenges facing Albany Park service providers. Looking at the list of services provided by the Cambodian Association of Illinois and Korean American Community Services, it is apparent that both organizations offer ESL classes, employment services and healthcare services. These two organizations are located within five blocks of each other in Albany Park, however interactions between the two groups are nearly non-existent.

The situation described above is not unique to those two organizations. Language and cultural barriers prevent many community organizations from forming social service networks within the neighborhood. Limited methods of disseminating information about available services are also a challenge faced by neighborhood service providers. Clearly people cannot access services if they are not aware of their availability.

## *Response*

Lack of social services was not an issue in Albany Park. In fact, many organizations duplicate services. In order to make more people aware of available services, and to facilitate linkages between service providers, several community organizations suggested that a comprehensive directory of all services and programs offered by neighborhood organizations should be compiled and distributed at various neighborhood community organizations, schools and religious institutions.

The researchers' major recommendation to the North River Commission at the end of the research period was based on this need for dissemination of information about neighborhood services and resources in different languages. The suggested way to achieve such a database was through an Internet-based "Virtual Community Center," which would be available to the public in the form of computer terminals featuring information about businesses, people, organizations, events, and health in Albany Park (see Bookman article in this issue). These computer terminals would be placed in train stations, libraries, park field houses, and some local community centers and businesses. An easy-to-use console would allow the user to select the language the information is presented in and would guide the used to

links about Albany Park happenings, job listings, and upcoming health fairs.

As a "Virtual Community Center," the public would be able to submit information to be posted. Information could be spread more easily this way. For example, a flier about the tenant rights workshop submitted at one terminal would be posted to all the terminals in the neighborhood. This site would be maintained by the North River Commission—perhaps in cooperation with another organization—and funding would come from grants. The North River Commission has taken initial steps to examine the feasibility of this "Virtual Community Center."

### **Findings: Affordability**

Research for this study was conducted during a time when many Chicago neighborhoods were feeling the effects of gentrification. In the summer of 1999, Albany Park was still a relatively affordable neighborhood, though gentrification pressures were beginning to be felt. The affordability of Albany Park made it a place where recent immigrants with little money could afford to rent an apartment, secure a job, and earn enough money to sustain their families. One reason why Albany Park's housing stock remains affordable is its continued deterioration. Landlords are unable to attract higher-income tenants and charge higher rents because the many of the units are substandard. This affordable housing is the only option for many low-income immigrant families (Conquergood 1992).

In a sense, Albany Park's affordability allows for its cultural diversity. Affordable rental units allow recent immigrants from many different countries to settle in the neighborhood. Commercial rental space is also affordable, and some of these immigrants have opened businesses, contributing to Lawrence Avenue's multicultural commercial corridor. In short, affordability was a major vehicle for promoting cultural diversity in Albany Park.

### **Assets**

The affordability of housing stock in Albany Park is a major asset—and a necessity—for many residents who cannot afford to pay high rents. Likewise, lower commercial property values mean that rental rates for commercial space are affordable, and small businesses thrive along Lawrence Avenue. In general, people said that goods and services along Lawrence Avenue were affordably priced. Discount

clothing and sundry shops, and ethnic markets comprised much of the streets commercial offerings. The affordable nature of Albany Park has allowed many immigrant groups to settle in the neighborhood, start businesses, and raise families on modest wages.

### **Challenges**

#### *Gentrification*

Residents, community organizations, and businesses all worry about the future of affordability in Albany Park. If gentrification becomes a major trend in Albany Park, residents will be displaced from their apartments, property taxes will rise, and small, independent businesses will not be able to afford commercial rents. One youth group director said that three of the teenagers in the group had recently been displaced from their homes by high-end, private developer buy-outs.

#### *Deteriorating Housing Stock*

Gentrification is one factor affecting affordable housing in Albany Park. Another factor is the deteriorating condition of some neighborhood apartment buildings due to age and landlord neglect. Residents of a single-room occupancy (SRO) building off Kedzie Street were fearful of being displaced by the demolition of their building by the city. Residents of this building said that they will "not go down without a fight," emphasizing the importance of affordable housing to Albany Park residents.

Many Albany Park residents are reluctant to complain about substandard apartment conditions for fear of being evicted. At a tenants' meeting in a building occupied exclusively by Cambodian families, women described leaking pipes, cracked toilets, broken windows, and rotting stairs in their apartments. They were reluctant to report the landlord to the City Building Inspector because they did not know they were entitled to safe, clean, dwellings, and most spoke little English and felt intimidated by the landlord. Landlords, on the other hand, also said that they would like to be able to communicate with their non-English-speaking tenants better so that the tenants' needs could be better met.

Concerns about losing affordable housing extend across ethnic and cultural lines. Informants who expressed concerns about affordable housing were Latino, White, and Cambodian, and it can be assumed that loss of affordable housing is also a concern to Albany Park's many other eth-

nic and cultural communities. Albany Park's economic diversity, which is discussed in greater detail further on, makes the preservation of affordable housing options integral to maintaining diversity throughout the neighborhood.

## Response

At the time of this study, gentrification in Albany Park had not progressed to a stage where many residents felt threatened. Property values had not risen substantially, and business owners were not worried about the immediate stability of their businesses. Residents did remark that, when gentrification begins to expand more rapidly, they do not know how they will fight this powerful force. They cited surrounding neighborhoods, like Mayfair and Ravenswood, where gentrifiers have purchased run-down apartment buildings and renovated them as luxury condominiums. Although tenants were given first option to purchase these condominiums, they could not afford to stay and had to seek affordable housing elsewhere. Neighborhood organizations should work with interested renters to connect them with programs that help first-time homebuyers.

Though gentrification was not an immediate concern of Albany Park residents, they were responding to several immediate challenges to affordable housing in the summer of 1999. For example, tenants of the SRO building that was threatened by demolition banded together and protested the demolition at community meetings and to the local alderman. In another instance, the North River Commission's on-staff community organizer arranged a meeting with Cambodian tenants of a run-down tenement building to teach them tenant's rights, and help them file complaint against their landlord. These two cases are examples of how social networks and community groups are using their assets and resources to affect change in Albany Park.

## Findings: *Diversity*

### Assets

The issue of diversity is a complicated one, not easily mastered during a six-week research period. Hannerz (1980) writes about *diversity* and *accessibility* as reciprocal forces shaping urban life. Diversity of people, goods and services is much greater in large urban areas than in rural ones, and likewise the accessibility of this diversity takes on

new dimensions in a dense urban neighborhood. As a large, dense, heterogeneous neighborhood, Albany Park provides urbanites with opportunities to access diverse resources and people.

Almost without exception, diversity was cited as an asset by informants from varied ethnic and economic sectors. However, the reasons people gave for *why* they consider diversity to be an asset of Albany Park varied. Some people appreciated that diversity draws people from other neighborhoods to spend money at ethnic shops and restaurants along Lawrence Avenue. For others, diversity in Albany Park was valued because people from different cultures live together and treat each other with respect.

Business owners enjoyed the accessibility of many good restaurants and small ethnic markets in the neighborhood. Likewise, the Albany Park Chamber of Commerce is interested in marketing neighborhood restaurants and other businesses to people in other parts of the city. From this viewpoint, diversity is valued because it makes Albany Park an exciting destination for people looking to sample ethnic cuisine and browse local shops and markets.

People from the neighborhood's many ethnic groups spoke about the value of diversity from a different perspective. They valued diversity as an asset in Albany Park because people from many different backgrounds live together in the neighborhood in relative peace. Unlike business owners who value the cross-cultural interactions that take place in restaurants and shops, residents place more value on the peaceful quality of interactions, rather than on the fact that interactions occur in the first place. Also unlike business owners and the Chamber of Commerce, who seek out diversity, residents said that they do not go out of their way to meet and socialize with people from other ethnic groups. Above all, they appreciate that the diversity in Albany Park is a safe, respectful diversity.

These disparate attitudes about the value of diversity illustrate these two groups' different ideas about what makes Albany Park a good place to live and work. To business owners, Albany Park's diversity is the key to making the neighborhood a successful commercial destination. For many of Albany Park's immigrant and refugee residents, the diversity of Albany Park is startling compared to many of their home countries, where brutal ethnic and cultural wars raged. The cultural backgrounds of these residents give them a unique perspective for understanding diversity in Albany Park. They do not value the *fact* of diversity, but rather appreciate *how it is enacted*.

## Challenges

Informants cited a number of diversity-related challenges facing Albany Park's multiethnic population. Almost without exception, these challenges stem from language and cultural barriers. Many people in Albany Park face communication challenges on a daily basis. Non-English speakers often have difficulties getting information about healthcare, childcare, employment, educational opportunities, and some have trouble talking with police and landlords. Likewise, English-only speaking service providers, employers, police, and landlords all said that they wish they could communicate with new immigrants more effectively. Language barriers prevent these new immigrants from accessing important resources, and also from sharing their assets with the larger community.

In some cases, miscommunications have caused distrust and hard feelings between some neighborhood groups. For example, owners of an ethnic business were insulted when it was suggested that the commercial signage along Lawrence Avenue should be "cleaned-up." The business owners took this to mean that non-English business signs were "dirty" and needed to be "cleaned-up." In fact, the sign clean-up project was part of a façade improvement program and applied to all business on the street. It was suggested that all signs should lay flat against the buildings rather than coming out at a 90-degree angle.

## Response

People in Albany Park value diversity as a neighborhood asset, however they also recognize that language and cultural barriers can cause misunderstandings among groups. When asked what could be done to address challenges and create communication bridges between the neighborhood's ethnic and cultural groups, people's responses focused on ways to *value* and *stabilize* diversity. These suggestions included:

- A neighborhood-wide party or festival would be a way for neighbors to show that they *value diversity*. It would be a way to bring people together to celebrate the dance, food, music, art and company of different cultures. It was even suggested that Lawrence Avenue should be blocked off for an "Albany Park street party."
- Creating more "community spaces" where people could go to share their cultures and talents. An employee at the Albany Park Community Center said that many people

want to teach cooking, sewing and tae-kwon-do classes, but there is not enough space at the Center. People's desire to share their cultural assets with others indicates the *value* they place on diversity.

- Creating a program to help local renters become homeowners in the neighborhood. This idea came from a local businessperson, and demonstrates the business community's desire to *stabilize diversity* in the area and to keep housing affordable.
- It was suggested that local banks should advertise to low-income households who are new to the area and may not know how to open bank accounts. This suggestion also reflects a desire to *stabilize diversity* in Albany Park.
- The Chamber of Commerce would like Albany Park Bank & Trust Company to support people starting new businesses in the neighborhood by providing low-interest loans. This would help people already living and working in the area, as well as drawing new businesses to the neighborhood. This suggestion demonstrates the Chamber's desire to *stabilize* the diversity of area businesses.

## Conclusions

Although the research for this paper is organized and presented in five separate themes, these themes are not exclusive unto themselves, and cannot be successfully analyzed as such. The categorization of these five themes is a useful framework for identifying the unique types of assets and challenges facing Albany Park. However, it must be understood that *all* aspects of life in Albany Park are interconnected. For example, recent immigrant groups in Albany Park adds to the rich ethnic and cultural *diversity* of the neighborhood, they occupy *affordable housing* units, own and work at *businesses* along Lawrence and Kedzie Avenue, and have children who go to *local schools* and participate in *youth organizations*.

These interconnections are a considerable neighborhood asset and provide opportunities for social networks to be formed. Barriers to social network formation in Albany Park exist despite the area's many assets and strengths. Likewise, challenges faced by the people of Albany Park do not persist because the neighborhood lacks the assets to conquer them. Rather, many challenges persist because communication and cultural difficulties prevent the sharing of assets among the neighborhood's many small "communities."

The purpose of this research project was to gather information about Albany Park's assets and challenges, and to determine sites for potential social network connections between groups and individuals. The data presented in the preceding pages is information about five major neighborhood "themes" in Albany Park: Youth, Safety, Services, Affordability, and Diversity. Assets and challenges related to each of these "themes" are identified, as are people's ideas for employing existing neighborhood resources to improve neighborhood quality of life. Possible social network connections are also identified. It was suggested many times during the summer of 1999 that the people of Albany Park possess all of the assets and resources necessary to addressing neighborhood challenges, however, language and cultural barriers have prevented extensive social networking and resource-sharing to this point.

Coordination of these assets across languages and cultures will be the greatest challenge to successful neighborhoods. This type of participatory collaboration and community building has always been the North River Commission's strength. By recognizing the fluid nature of Albany Park, the Commission can effectively work with diverse segments of the neighborhood population to facilitate social networks and the sharing of information and resources. This will not be a one-time task, but rather a continuing process, responsive to the constant changes in Albany Park's dynamic communities.

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# Preserving Heritage in the Face of Change: Russian Jews and the Gentrification of Uptown

Rabbi Philip Lefkowitz

**Rabbi Lefkowitz** heads the Agudas Achim North Shore Congregation in Chicago.

**A**s the rabbi of Agudas Achim North Shore Congregation in Uptown, I was delighted with the opportunity to use two anthropological researchers in our community. I suggested studying two particular senior groups in Uptown Jews from the former Soviet Union and seniors from several Asian countries that constitute a significant part of Uptown's population. Victoria Hegner, one of the researchers from the Urban Research Initiative of the Center for Cultural Understanding and Change at The Field Museum, did her research in the Russian Jewish community. It is to her report that I wish to respond.

It's hard to assess success in the rabbinate. Being Jewish defies a single definition: An affinity for Jewish religious practice, or Jewish culture, or Jewish peoplehood, or even Jewish social activism (not to mention Zionism) are but some of the examples of Jewish affiliation. In my particular situation, I was interested in knowing how I fare in my work with the majority of the congregation's members—seniors from the former Soviet Union—in bringing them back to their religion and helping them become more comfortable in their new home, the United States. Raised under the yoke of communism, these elderly Jews know little of their culture and religion.

Here's a typical example, which occurred at our community seder, the Passover meal at which Jews commemorate the Exodus from Egypt. The narrative is introduced by asking four questions, which is done by the youngest member of the household. In passing prior to reciting these questions, I said in Yiddish (our folk language; many seniors still remember some Yiddish because it was the language used by their grandparents) that those assembled must surely remember the joy with which they asked the *Fier Kashas*. There was no response. Not only hadn't they ever personally asked these questions at the seder, they had never even heard of this well-known Jewish tradition.



This and other, similar events brought home to me the sensitivity with which we must address their plight, to avoid compounding the shame they feel of not knowing about their own Jewishness. Attending the seder and Sabbath and High Holy Day services gives these individuals a sense of connection to their Jewish roots they'd never felt before. Individuals thanked me for making the community seder, then confided in me that this was the first seder they'd ever attended! (Most are in their late 70s or early 80s.) In the former Soviet Union, of course, attending synagogue, or even speaking Yiddish, could have landed them in jail or, worse, the Gulag, the forced labor camps where inmates were starved and worked to death. The vast majority of Jews in the Soviet Union therefore had to avoid pronounced demonstration of their Jewishness. My seniors are truly "Stalin's children." My goal has been to reintroduce them to their religion and culture while helping them embrace American society. Yet I had no tool to assess the success of our efforts.

Victoria Hegner's report was therefore important to my rabbinate and to the work of our congregation. She assessed the community in terms of those Jews who attend synagogue and those who don't (referred to, respectively, as the "synagogue community" and the "Russian community", which was quite enlightening). She observed that the synagogue community tended to be more open to American culture and more willing to learn English. This observation was gratifying, to say the least.

Hegner concluded that members of the synagogue community were able to transition to American life more easily because they felt a deeper connection with Jewish religion and culture, rather than Russian culture. Jewish culture can blend with and reinforce the American way of life; Russian culture, not so easily. Her analysis underscored for my congregation and for myself the important results we were achieving in our modest programs, spurring us toward greater commitment and achievement.

In fact, we are making a tremendous effort to create a senior center—a goal that has become more important than ever as we seek to meet the cultural and social needs of our senior population. We envision a place that will offer classes in English, American history, programs in art and music, and opportunities to interact with other ethnic groups residing in Uptown, all of which will complement the religious activities of the synagogue.

Hegner's report has meant a great deal to our work at Agudas Achim in a practical sense as well. We have referred to her findings in our funding applications for a senior center. The prestige of The Field Museum, the professionalism of her report and all the reports published in *Perspectives in Civic Activism and City Life*, for that matter, have significantly influenced the funders who consider our applications. Recently, through the offices of state senator Lisa Madigan, we were awarded a significant state grant to remodel our kitchen. This will let us open a Golden Diner's Club, a senior citizens' luncheon program sponsored by the city's Department of Aging, which will serve as a cornerstone of our senior center. And, as our seniors become more comfortable with their lives in America, they will become empowered to tackle the issue of gentrification in Uptown.

In short, this unique Field Museum program has boosted our awareness and understanding of the nature of our community and, in tangible ways, supported us and others as we try to create an inviting home for all residents of Uptown.

*Photographs courtesy of Costello Communications*

# Imagine Englewood...if! Working to Collaborate, Communicate, and Connect

Jean Carter-Hill and Kathryn Haines

**Jean Carter-Hill** is the Executive Director of Imagine Englewood...if!

**Kathryn Haines** is Community Consultant for the Jewish Council on Urban Affairs.

**T**he vision began with a simple act.

In 1999, members of the 56th Street and Paulina Avenue block club in the Englewood community area of Chicago, attended an Ogden Park block club fair, seeking information. One display in particular caught their eye: The "Imagine Englewood...if!" exhibit. In fact, it drew the block club members into the group of dedicated residents who participated in Imagine Englewood...if! citizen leader workshops.

The 56th and Paulina block club, which renamed themselves Neighbors in Bloom, had a clear vision of what their block might look like. They saw streets with less gang activity, with united neighbors; a lot without vacant buildings, and alive with blooming neighborhood gardens. They also envisioned a strong block club.

Working with Imagine Englewood...if!, Neighbors in Bloom learned to connect with fellow block members, encouraging them to focus on the positive and to design strategies that would include as many block residents as possible. Imagine Englewood...if! connected the block members to the City of Chicago's Green Corps program, an organization that links neighborhood residents with gardening resources.

Through Green Corps, the block received seeds and flowers and participated in a gardening workshop on the West Side.

The fruits of these connections were evident one spring, several years after the block club made its way to the block club fair. It was nearly almost time for planting on 56th and Paulina. This time, Neighbors in Bloom knew where to turn for city resources that would help them keep their block beautiful. And that year, there were more residents outside attending to the budding flowers. Neighbors in Bloom expanded, and might soon embrace the block next door.

The community of Englewood cannot be neatly drawn on a map. Though Community Area 68, labeled Englewood, has delineated boundaries, a resident's description of Englewood cannot be so easily contained. Residents will tell you that Englewood and West Englewood (officially



Community Area 67) are all Englewood, and that their community stretches, roughly, from 55th Street on the north to 75th Street on the south, from the Dan Ryan Expressway on the east to Hamilton Avenue (alongside the railroad tracks)

on the west. And within Englewood lie several smaller communities' seven little wards. As a result, Englewood's sense of community can be a fragile one.

It wasn't always this way. Longtime Englewood residents remember a time when their community was not carved into these seven wards. In 1947, Englewood had just three wards and roughly 150,000 people; by 1998, Englewood had seven wards and a population of under 100,000 people (U.S. Census). One resident noted, "With re-mapping and the community split among several aldermen, it was different to see how they did not get along, even though the same community and the same issues were being served. There is a bad neighbor policy, because involvement is strictly defined by ward lines."



Imagine Englewood...if!, a community-based, volunteer organization in Englewood, looks beyond those strict boundaries. It sees neither seven separate wards nor two community areas. "We have a vision of a greater Englewood community that is empowered because it communicates, collaborates, and connects," notes Jean Carter-Hill, director of Imagine Englewood...if!

Having a vision is one thing. Bringing it to life is a whole different matter. How does one unite a divided community, one in which many residents have never had a stake? How does one overcome the fragmentation caused by seven different wards?

Imagine Englewood...if! succeeds in answering those questions. To reconnect their community, the group's members cultivate indigenous community leaders, share information on local resources with residents, and link community organizations to one another as well as to groups outside of Englewood.

Imagine Englewood...if!'s first step: conducting a workshop for community leaders. This workshop was based on the Imagine Chicago program that trains citizen leaders. Sessions focused on seemingly small matters—how Englewood residents could improve their community simply by organizing their own block, or by taking a small idea growing in the back of their mind and making it a reality.

But as residents worked together, big things began to happen. They cleaned up a block. They created a neighborhood garden. They published an informative newsletter for residents. And they helped the Imagine Englewood...if! / Nicholson Dance Exploration dance group travel to Ohio. Most importantly, as they worked together, they connected with other residents and shared information about their block clubs and their activities.

While Imagine Englewood...if! worked to strengthen community leaders, they also began to amass information on community resources. Much of this information has been put into the Englewood Web site, [www.Englewoodfutures.org](http://www.Englewoodfutures.org) a project Imagine Englewood...if! hopes will grow. This is no mere formality. The Web site will not only keep its own residents informed, but it will broadcast a positive image to those beyond Englewood, letting outsiders know that Englewood is a vibrant, resource-rich community, and not merely the impoverished, crime-infested neighborhood often portrayed in the media.

The group's first real test occurred on Oct. 28, 2000, the date of the first Make a Difference Day. For this event, Imagine Englewood...if! brought together Englewood residents both young and old. The goal? To help neighbors connect with one another by sharing information and by discussing critical community topics. The group arranged tours that highlighted exciting neighborhood activities—activities that took many residents by surprise. Said one resident: "I have been living here for fourteen years, and I live in the heart of Englewood, and the things that I learned today, I never knew existed in the Englewood area."

In their feedback on Make a Difference Day, residents called for more information about Englewood resources and requested networking opportunities that would bring together residents and organizations. Creating links between various Englewood groups will be an integral part of Imagine Englewood...if!'s work in the future. The success of Make a Difference Day suggested that Imagine Englewood...if!'s goals of connection, collaboration, and communication are shared by many Englewood residents.

While Imagine Englewood...if! has been working to connect entities within Englewood, Imagine Chicago and the Web site have worked to bring the outside in. Imagine Chicago has created an impressive link between the director of the Human City Institute, based in Birmingham, England, and Imagine Englewood...if! Twice, representatives of the Human City Institute have traveled to Chicago to see Imagine Englewood...if! in action. The two groups remain connected via the Web. A member of the Upper Skeena Learning Community Partnerships in Canada—a group whose vision mirrors that of Imagine Englewood...if!—discovered Imagine Englewood...if! on the World Wide Web. They have reached out to Imagine Englewood...if! through e-mail to share ideas and experiences. Perhaps one day Imagine Englewood...if! leaders will travel to Canada.

Today Imagine Englewood...if! continues working toward its vision of communication, collaboration, and connection. Make a Difference Day reinforced the belief that without those three elements, residents cannot become empowered. Imagine Englewood...if! hopes to become a clearinghouse for information that will flow throughout the entire Englewood “community,” including West Englewood, and not merely to one or two wards. Those who graduated from the Imagine Englewood...if! program, such as the members of The Real Throopers block club, continue to participate in the work of Imagine Englewood...if! and to contribute to the growing storehouse of community information.

Imagine Englewood...if! believes that by realizing its vision of one community, collaborations will blossom—between wards, between young and old, between park district and church and school. As resources are leveraged and flow into the community, residents will develop a sense of ownership in Englewood. They will receive the tools they need to educate themselves, to start a community business, to create a safe block for their families.

Imagine Englewood...if!



*Photographs courtesy of Imagine Englewood...if!*